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DISCUSSION

HOUSING CONDITIONS IN SMALL TOWNS

BY ELMER S. FORBES

MR. LAWRENCE VEILLER presiding

Tuesday evening, June 6, at 8.15 o'clock

MR. ROBERT E. TODD, Housing Investigator, White Fund, Lawrence, Mass. :

I will contribute a few facts to supplement Mr. Forbes' major premise underlying his discussion of ways and means, namely, that the small cities do need building regulations.

I had an amusing experience in Lynn last week. I had written to the building commissioner that I should like to see one or two plans of good houses that were popular in Lynn. The first plan shown me had two alcove rooms opening into an air shaft, and three air shafts. Lynn has only recently adopted the magnificent distance of six feet between front and rear buildings. Lowell has a building code in the works, but at present has practically no regulation for light and air in buildings, and only some of the usual regulations for fire protection.

Lowell apparently has some sanitary conditions, such as bad plumbing, use of one water closet by several families and water closets in cellars, which ought to make a city of her size ashamed of herself. The city has some large tenement houses, many of them four-story frame structures. There is one house of 32 tenements, another of 48. In one of the larger houses, where each tenement has four rooms, two are windowless, except that the end tenements in each house have windows in three rooms.

In Lawrence we have examined six of the most crowded half blocks, which may be taken as samples of about twenty blocks at the center. In the most crowded of these blocks, we find a density of population of 643 per acre.

We have in Lawrence an unusual example of water-closet requirements. In 1894, seventeen years ago, the board of

health, on account of the fact that the members were nearly all plumbers, passed a set of plumbing regulations which is not excelled by the best in Massachusetts today. These regulations demand that there be one water closet for each family, and that it have a window three square feet in area and opening to the outer air. Three years ago the requirement was added that each water closet be in a separate compartment. In practise this had been secured from the first without regulation. These regulations, enforced as they have been even in the old tenements, make it possible for Lawrence to consider her sanitary condition with a great deal of pride.

The city, however, has been playing most seriously with fire risk. More than 250 four-story frame houses is her unenviable record. In the last four and one-half years, 88 of these houses have been built, having a housing capacity of more than 2000 persons. The city has practically no fire limits, only a narrow strip of land along the main street. In 1880 there was a good-sized fire district, but at that time the real-estate interests wiped it off the books. The present fire limits are so insignificant that when the National Board of Fire Underwriters were in Lawrence in July 1908, several of the city officials, including the building inspector, did not know that there were any fire limits.

There are dark rooms to a greater extent than the citizens of Lawrence believe, and they are being created in new tenements, although not universally. Bad courts exist in many buildings, even in those being constructed to-day. I might describe one court, more than 13 feet deep, 3 feet 6 inches wide, and at the inner end with recesses on either side. At the top the width, 3 feet 6 inches, is reduced to 1 foot 6 inches. Over the whole court the boards of the clothes yard on the roof have been extended. The court furnishes the only light for two rooms on each floor, six living rooms in the house, and they are practically windowless. In addition to this, sink rooms and water closets open on the court.

Connecticut, six years ago this month, passed a building law which applies to cities of 20,000, and in the census of 1910 there are nine cities in Connecticut which come under that law. If

Massachusetts had the same law, there would be under it twenty-seven cities and the town of Brookline. Massachusetts' urban population has increased to this extent: thirty-five years ago the population in cities of 30,000 or more was 38 per cent of the total population of the state. Today the population in cities of 30,000 or more is 61 per cent. That fast we are traveling in the direction of urban living.

MR. BALL:

Under the direction of Professor Tufts, of the University of Chicago, during the summer of 1909, a more or less cursory investigation of conditions was made in Aurora, Joliet, Freeport, East St. Louis, Alton and Moline, and the same general situation of neglect and lack of control which has been spoken of this evening was found to be prevalent in all those cities. Photographs were collected showing some of these bad conditions, and an effort was made this year to get the authorization of the legislature for the appointment of a commission to study the situation throughout the state as a basis for legislation. We think the easiest way to control the situation would be through state law, which would affect the smaller as well as the larger places. It is necessary to create public opinion before we can care for these things in the state of Illinois.

In connection with my work in Chicago I have had opportunity to go out into smaller surrounding cities and see something of their housing. Freeport is a railroad town about 100 miles west of Chicago. There are not many housing evils there, and yet there are two notable examples of buildings recently erected having less than a foot and a half between them, with windows opening upon that space less than a foot and a half throughout the length of the building. There are also, on the principal street, a number of three-story and one or two four-story buildings with apartments on the upper floors and a store on the lower floor, and many of the former have rooms entirely without communication with the outer air.

Racine, Wisconsin, is the most thoroughly sewered small city that I have ever studied. It is their habit in Racine, when a man builds a house on the outskirts of the city, to extend the

sewer system two or three squares, if necessary, to sewer that house. At the same time their sewage disposal is into a small river which flows through the town, and is undoubtedly a source of river and lake pollution, which should be given attention. There are one or two very bad examples of overcrowded lodging houses in Racine which I noted; one of them was an exceedingly dirty building, in which were housed a great many laborers. I saw in the attic rooms, only six feet high, as good evidences of overcrowding as I have ever seen in a small city.

In Aurora, a beautiful little city lying on both banks of the Fox River, one would hardly expect to find bad housing, and yet in a half-day's visit I was able to point out to the mayor and city solicitor some very striking examples of things that ought not to be. There was an aggravated case of fire danger, a livery stable with horses stabled on the floor below, and above that, four apartments, two of them occupied by families and two vacant. At the rear of this building was a tumble-down shanty in which hay and vehicles were stored. The only entrance to the apartments on the second story was a stairway from the street alongside the livery stable. The building was long and deep, and the rear apartments had to depend solely upon the stairway for access. It was as bad a fire-trap as I have ever seen. I saw three shack dwellings on the banks of the Fox River in that town that for conditions of dirt and dilapidation I have never seen equaled.

I have had some experience in dirt and dilapidation. We went into one of those houses, inhabited by an old colored man, and the mayor and I went through his front room into the rear room, which was very dirty. In going out we saw cobwebs which were as thick as one's hand. Perhaps you can tell me how long a cobweb has to hang before it gets three-quarters of an inch thick.

In Aurora one of the principal sewers, four feet in diameter, and running at the time I saw it just about half full of sewage, discharges into an open ditch within twelve feet of the rear of a large lodging house in which twenty or thirty men are housed. Adjacent to that lodging house I saw another one, where on account of lack of proper conveniences it was the

habit of the housewife to throw out the kitchen slops on the adjoining ground. Although I have seen some pretty good examples of neglect, I have never seen such an accumulation of kitchen-sink refuse as was heaped up against that building. It was three feet above the level of the ground, and sloping out in conical shape from the house against which it rested.

Those are the things we find in small towns, and we should do something to remedy them. One habit I have in visiting cities is to inquire at public libraries as to what works they have on housing. I am usually suprised to learn that they have possibly only one book or perhaps two. It seems to me one of the best things that can be done where there are public libraries is to make such inquiry and suggest to the librarian the advisability of placing in the library some of the standard housing literature.

Something was said by the last speaker about fire limits. We have the principle of local option applied to Chicago in a novel way. I have never heard an argument up to the present time in the city council or in any committee of the city council suggesting that the question of fire limits was a broad matter involving public policy, but merely a question as to what the alderman wanted or the people of that district wanted. There are some notable and surprising cases within my observation where a builder intending to erect a frame factory purchased ground outside the fire limits, and where somebody in the neighborhood, objecting to the presence of the particular structure, requested that that ground be included within the fire limits, which has been done with great alacrity. It will probably be possible in many towns where there are not at the present time frame buildings, to get requirements prohibiting their use. The difference in cost between a frame and a brick building is relatively small, not more than 10 to 12 per cent and negligible when one comes to count the advantage of the brick building over the frame.

Another point worthy of attention is the increasing tendency to underground occupation. The one thing that has impressed me in the city of New York in my observation of the last two or three days has been the increasing occupation of underground

spaces. Since I lived here seven years ago this has gone on with suprising rapidity, and there are hundreds of tenements and hundreds of other buildings that had cellars and basements unoccupied when I left here, into which have now gone business enterprises, bootblackening establishments, markets, little shoe stores, barber shops and similar establishments. These have been increasingly put underground, not alone in big cities, but in small towns.

The town of Urbana, Illinois, has about 12,000 population. It is the seat of the University of Illinois. There is no reason why there should be a single bit of underground occupation, and yet there has been put underground in a building in Urbana, a barber shop which has absolutely no communication with the outer air. It has a skylight of glass in a vault out in front, but absolutely no window to the outer air. I think of this case because it illustrates something to which we ought to have our eyes open as an increasing evil.

MRS. BACON :

I ask simply for advice, as to what can be done in a situation such as exists in Taylorsville, a village of shacks right across from Terre Haute. The conditions there are unspeakable. I should like to ask Mr. Veiller this question: Could anything be done by having another clause in the tenement-house law, if we can get one to apply to little shacks, or should we proceed by enlarging the powers of the state board of health, giving them power to wipe out these dreadful places under any pretext ?

MR. VEILLER :

I think Mr. Forbes in his paper really answered Mrs. Bacon's question. I cannot see that the problem of the small town differs from that of the large city. The only way you can solve it is by awakening public sentiment which will work along the lines that Mr. Forbes has described. There is no obstacle to controlling the one-family house in Chicago any more than there is to controlling the tenement.

CAPTAIN CHARLES J. ALLEN :

First, I want to say a word in favor of state supervision. If

you will permit me, I will go back to 1903, when the effort for housing reform took definite shape in New Jersey. A number of ladies in the Oranges, essentially the residential section of the state, just outside of Newark, had organized a civic sanitation society. They came to Trenton and tried to enlist the interest of the legislature in the matter. At that time I was doing newspaper work as legislative correspondent. I talked with the ladies, and becoming much interested, brought them into the governor's office and introduced them. Governor Franklin Murphy heard what the ladies said and replied, "Prepare a resolution authorizing the governor to appoint a commission to investigate housing conditions in the state and report to the next legislature." This I did, and Assemblyman Lord introduced the resolution, which was carried without objection. In my capacity as a newspaper man I had been through various sections of the larger cities of New Jersey, and I thought that I knew housing conditions pretty well, but when I went out to make an official investigation I was astounded to find out how much I did not know; I found things that I had never seen on any superficial visit to the tenement sections and had never even dreamed of.

The commission appointed by Governor Murphy put in a full year investigating tenement-house conditions throughout the state, and at the end we started to prepare a bill for presentation to the legislature. We had the kind services of Mr. de Forest and Mr. Veiller in the ground work of our bill. We found that in New York there was a tenement-house law for cities of the first class, which left the smaller municipalities entirely alone. That did not suit us. We found that the smaller municipalities so far as we had investigated them in New Jersey, already had a tenement-house problem to wrestle with or had started in to create one. Our bill was introduced in the legislature in 1904, by Mr. Everett Colby, who has since become famous in New Jersey. He was then minority leader and Congressman Hamill was majority leader.

That bill had the unusual experience of being discussed favorably on the floor by both majority and minority leaders; and it passed the assembly without a dissenting vote. In the

senate there was much opposition. The tenement-house owners, the speculative builders and the contractors, the material men and a number of architects found in the proposed tenement-house law many things that were dangerous to their business, and they organized a determined opposition, with Senator Hudspeth as the leader on the floor of the senate, to fight the bill when it came up on third reading. The senator stayed up all night in Trenton with architects and contractors who were loading him up with additions to the bill.

One of the features of the proposed bill was the outer court, four feet wide, and Senator Hudspeth argued on that point, that it was ridiculous and absolutely absurd, "a tenement with a court four feet wide." Senator Bachellor promptly replied to Hudspeth's objections by saying, "What do you understand by the term 'court'?"—"Well, it is just a court."—"Do you understand what it means?"—"Whatever it is, two feet and eight inches is enough for it."

That was the character of the opposition to the tenement-house law. We succeeded in getting it through on the very last night of the session, with just the requisite number of votes.

Governor Murphy appointed his board that night and it began its official existence on the first of May following. We started out with the intention of obtaining an actual physical census of all tenement houses in the state, starting as near as we could at the center of each of the larger cities and continuing in a constantly widening circle. At the present time we have a record of 48,642 tenement houses which were in existence at the time the tenement-house law went into effect.

Just outside of Newark there is a pretty little municipality, Nutley, in which there is not the slightest necessity for tenement houses. In one section of Nutley there was a thrifty German who had a triangular tract of land fronting on two sides on a road. He lived on one corner of that himself, and cultivated the greater part of it for garden truck, which he sold in Nutley and the village of Franklin, employing a dozen men. It did not appear to him to be good business to pay these fellows wages on his farm and have them go to Nutley and pay rent, so he conceived

the idea of building a tenement house on his tract. He came to the office—somebody told him he must submit plans to the department—and showed plans for a four-story brick building for twelve families. There was no lack of light and air, as he had six or eight acres around the house, but there was no plumbing,—not a bit from top to bottom. I asked him where his water supply was to come from and he said a well in the yard. Then I asked him, "Where is your water closet?"—"Over here." The level of the water closet was some ten or twelve feet higher than the water in the well. I said that he could not do that, that he must put the water closet in the house. He said that was easy enough. So he went away and came back again with the plans. I looked at them and explained that he could not do what the plan showed; that he must trap every one of the fixtures and he asked why. I said, "Don't you know that that is a standing invitation for gas to escape all over your house?" And he said, "What's the difference? Nobody but Italians will live there."

As for our old buildings, I have seen a great many of the tenement houses in New York and many in New Jersey, and there is nothing you have seen in New York that you cannot see in New Jersey. We have all the evils and more. The work of removing the evils in existing tenement houses is about as difficult in New Jersey as it is in New York.

In case of violations, or in case of refusal to comply with regulations we notify the owner that such violations are found existing and that they are contrary to law. We give him ten days to think it over. If the violations are not removed, we send him an order directing the removal, and if they are not removed, we are done until we get the case into court. We have to sue through the attorney general of the state, and sometimes it is several months before we can get the case into the courts, so that our method of dealing with people who refuse to comply with the law is rather cumbersome. Every year we have tried to get a way out of that, but we have been unable to get anything new, because we do not dare to let down the bars while we have good provisions in the law, for fear of having some bad features introduced.

The trouble we have in New Jersey is the difficulty of doing the work with only 22 inspectors to cover the entire state. That means looking after the construction of new buildings, removing violations on old buildings, keeping up our census of existing houses and taking care of all complaints, of which last year we had over 1200 from different parts of the state. All that must be done with 22 inspectors. The increasing of our force must be done through the legislature, and every year for the last six years we have asked for more inspectors, but without success.

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